“Who would build a school on a landfill in the middle of six housing projects and expect good things to happen?” asked MiShawna Moore.

But good things are happening at Sanders-Clyde Elementary School in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. And they all began when Moore became principal of this 299-student, pre-K-7 school five years ago.

Moore was a former teacher at Sanders-Clyde with no school administration experience when she was named principal. Some in the community worried that a young, inexperienced leader was not what was needed at a school that was performing poorly and had been for years.

The 2002-2003 South Carolina Annual School Report Card painted the picture of a school that was failing in its efforts to serve a population that was overwhelmingly black, poor, and living in housing projects or homeless shelters. The school’s test performance was “unsatisfactory,” its improvement rating was “unsatisfactory,” and the school was not making adequate yearly progress.

Many parents were attempting to use their transfer option under the No Child Left Behind Act to get their children into better schools. They figured it really wouldn’t matter who was now at the helm. They figured wrong.

A Turnaround Recipe
One of the first actions Moore took after being named principal was to go door to door in the community to let parents know she wanted their children at Sanders-Clyde. As many as 60 students within walking distance of the school already had transferred to nearby schools, while others were being homeschooled.

Moore carried a message of both needing and expecting parental and community engagement. She reminded parents that she had taught many of their older children, and that they were all doing well in middle and high school. She also boldly promised to provide an education equal to that of the high-performing academic magnet school located only one mile away. Finally, she emphasized her commitment by putting her own job on the line.

“I told them if the report card rating didn’t improve the first year, I would resign,” Moore said. How did she know what to do? “I put myself in the children’s place. What would I want?” Moore replied. “So, we now know every child’s name. We know every parent’s name and face. We set high expectations for our children and we do everything we can to see that they meet them. We do not suspend kids and send them into the streets. We make sure all children get a hot meal before they go home.”

Moore’s answer was completely consistent with the philosophy and approach I observed in many hours at Sanders-Clyde. “We are a family,” one teacher told me, and, referring to her students, “we are their family.”

Families take care of each other, and sometimes this means intervening if someone is not doing what is best for the family. For example, while the children are often hungry, there are foods they simply won’t eat. Some may see this as ungrateful, but not Moore; she sees it as part of a cultural pattern.

Instead, the children at Sanders-Clyde get fresh fruit, salads, hot dogs, pizza, fried chicken, and other familiar, kid-friendly foods. At the end of the day, leftover food goes into backpacks so there will be snacks at home. Additionally, every child has access to a hot dinner, either at the school, at the community center across the street, or by carrying it home in a plastic foam container.

Supporting Families
An extension of the school’s daily breakfast, lunch, and dinner program is the Thanksgiving basket. Last year, Sanders-Clyde staff members collected enough community donations to fill large boxes with turkey, chicken, pork, potatoes, rice, canned goods, cake mix, and other staples of a traditional holiday feast.

It’s All in the Family
A novice principal made family connections the foundation for a remarkable transformation of a failing school.

Linda Kight Winter
for their 150 families.

Before Christmas, a teacher sat down in private with every child to develop a wish list. Staff then collected items through donations from businesses, community organizations, and individuals. Last year, every child received a CD player, two sets of school uniforms, casual clothing, and other items from a selection of gifts that included bicycles, books, board games, and sports equipment. These gifts, along with additional gifts for preschool siblings, were delivered to the parents so they (or Santa) could give them to their children for Christmas.

The school houses a parent center in a large, bright corner classroom. Every Wednesday, a local agency called Parents and Children Together sponsors a parent education class and support group. Parents also may come to the center to use a computer, select educational resources to take home, or to view videos. One parent used the center’s computer to complete an online course through the local technical college.

Staff members also support parents in other ways. One particularly grateful parent of a behaviorally challenging student said, “I would have to quit both my jobs if they didn’t work with him here.” Her son had been sent home repeatedly from another school for misbehavior. However, Moore will not suspend her students “into the streets.” She insists all problems be handled in-house.

The school counselor often assists parents in making and getting to medical appointments for their children, many of whom need medication for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or other health issues. Much of this effort takes place during her personal time. Other Sanders-Clyde staff members use their own time to solicit donations, deliver holiday baskets, and prepare for fundraising events.

Staff Collaboration

The idea of supporting the family translates to faculty collegiality and support as well. Teachers ask one another for help with instruction. One young teacher said, “It is important for me to know that there are other teachers, a principal, and a guidance counselor who will work with me and offer suggestions” if she is struggling. Another said that having a colleague observe “is not seen as an invasion; it is seen as support.” A third added, “Everyone is working together on the same page and willing to help any way we can.”

This collaborative support includes the belief that all Sanders-Clyde students belong to every staff member. Several teachers said if they see a child in the hallway with a need, it doesn’t matter which teacher should be notified; it only matters that the need is met. Any “family member” can and must be responsible for intervening.

When asked why the school is now so successful, nearly all the teachers mentioned outcomes that are much more likely to occur in small schools. All used the terms “team” or “family” or “community” to describe the school atmosphere. While observing the beginning of a school day there, I witnessed a brief interchange that was dramatic evidence of this climate.

A kindergarten student walking in the front door passed another student’s parent exiting the building. “Good morning, James,” the parent said as the boy smiled shyly. Up three steps, an older boy—perhaps in sixth or seventh grade—greeted him with “Hey, James, what’s up?” As the boy turned the corner to go to his classroom, the first-grade teacher said, “Good morning, James.” I wondered how many schoolchildren are fortunate enough to be greeted by name three times upon entering the school by three people who, in many larger schools, would have had no occasion to know him.

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What Has Changed?

Today, Sanders-Clyde is ranked by the state as “good” in test performance and “excellent” in improvement, and has met all 13 of its objectives to make adequate yearly progress for the second straight year. Perhaps most reflective of the school’s emphasis on community, 99 percent of parents now attend conferences, and 100 percent of teachers surveyed are satisfied with the home-school relations.

The achievement gains have been remarkable. In the 2005-2006 school year, 100 percent of the third graders (who have spent their entire school careers under Moore’s leadership) were proficient or advanced in language arts, and 80 percent were proficient or advanced in math. Compare that with 2002-2003, when only 12 percent of third graders were proficient or advanced in language arts, and only 8 percent were proficient or advanced in math.

Most striking is what has happened to those third graders who were performing so poorly. The majority of them are now students in the sixth grade and only 10 percent are below basic in language arts and math—a dramatic improvement that runs counter to trends in most schools with high-poverty children.

Sanders-Clyde has been honored for its accomplishments by being named a Palmetto Gold award winner—South Carolina’s highest honor for school performance—for two consecutive years. Under the tutelage of an outstanding principal, the faculty and staff at Sanders-Clyde have addressed the critical aspects of school reform by meeting basic survival, safety, and belonging needs, building community trust and support, and nurturing significant relationships with their students and families. In addition, the Sanders-Clyde team has consistently raised expec-
tations, the quality of instruction, the rigor of the curriculum, and the academic support children need to be academically successful.

One Turnaround Deserves Another
Her remarkable success at Sanders-Clyde has led the district administration to consider how they might extend Moore’s influence to other poorly performing schools. For the 2007-2008 school year, she was assigned to another nearby high-poverty school. In typical Sanders-Clyde fashion, her faculty and staff regard improving this neighboring school as both their responsibility and an opportunity for growth. One teacher said, “We absolutely love and adore Ms. Moore, so we will do anything to support her in whatever she wants us to do. If she wants us to go there and mentor teachers, we will. If she wants them to come here and work with us, we will. I’m excited. It can only make us better.”

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